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The Other Place: Magic Realist Spaces in Gloria Naylor's Selected Novels

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The Other Place: Magic Realist Spaces in Gloria Naylor's Selected Novels

African American literature is a body of work depicting the discrimination faced by African Americans in the American society. The African Americans as a community have been otherized on multiple fronts, right from racial, cultural, political and linguistic to the economic, educational and even geographical grounds. Thus, they have remained as a marginalized group in the dominant white society. Further, the women of the community lead a doubly marginalized existence of both racial and sexual otherization in the white patriarchal society and are disadvantaged in all aspects. Hence, the work of African American women authors is a ground rife with exploration of the multiple issues affecting them.

Gloria Naylor is one such author whose works are emblematic of the African American women's experience and are the bases of this proposed research. While Naylor is critically acclaimed, her works are not very widely researched upon or studied, unlike those of the holy trinity of African American women's literature: Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Maya Angelou. Hence, focusing on Naylor's texts from a voice lesser heard becomes both interesting and necessary.

Naylor's corpus includes six works of fiction which are distinct in their narrative techniques and approach towards the subject of African American experience. Another feature that makes her works stand out is that they exist as individual novels but are also connected to each other by several threads. Her works consist of *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), *Linden Hills* (1985) connected to the previous work by the character of Melanie or Kiswana Browne, *Mama Day* (1988), *Bailey's Café* (1992) connected to the former by the character of George, *The Men of Brewster Place* (1999), a sequel to her debut work and *1996* (2005), a fictionalized memoir. All her works discuss and explore the African American female experience and also deal with not just racial and sexual, but even gender issues. Naylor's works

constantly try to break the hegemonic perspective and do away with binaries, revealing multiplicity of voices and narratives.

This research work intends to focus on three of her novels, *Linden Hills* (1985), *Mama Day* (1988) and *Bailey's Café* (1992) and explore the existence of magic realism in the spaces of Naylor's setting. It aims to analyze the use of magic realism as a narrative technique especially pertaining to spaces within her works, and how it enables the raising of African American issues, circumventing the hegemonic and binary portrayal of lives in literature and society. This work will take into account several theoretical approaches to analyze the primary texts that will be discussed further. To begin with, the primary approaches of Magic Realism and Spatial Studies need to be elaborated upon.

Magic realism, as a genre and a narrative technique combines the contrary terms of 'magic' and 'real', where both are inseparably united in equal measures and where magic and reality coincide without any discord. As a literary technique, it was most popularly used by Latin American authors like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende, etc. Other postcolonial authors like Salman Rushdie have also famously used this narrative technique. However, the conception of the term was not in literature. The term was first coined by a German art critic Franz Roh in 1925, as 'Magischer Realismus', to describe a certain trend in painting and art that focused on material aspects of objects that existed in reality and portrayed them with technological brilliance. This form of art was born out of expressionist art, and was closely linked to Surrealism. Roh found magic realism to be connected with surrealism, in the fact that they both depicted an augmented reality. But he also differentiated it, as he believed that magic realism conveyed a magical nature of the rational world, while the latter depended on a more psychological, subconscious rendition of reality. Further, Roh defined 'magic realism' as the concept of the "mystery [that] does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and

palpitates over it" (qtd in Bowers 2). However, his was not the only definition available for the term as it began to spread and gain notoriety across cultures and art forms.

Tracing its history, it is discovered that the term was taken up by Italian writer Massimo Bontempelli and Belgian writers such as Johan Daisne and Hubert Lampo among others. The concept came to Hispanic America, in the 1930s and 1940s, where it was a phenomenon first employed by Venezuelan writer Arturo Uslar-Pietri in his short stories, who adopted the term in Spanish as 'realismo mágico' in 1948. In 1949, French-Russian Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier went on to rephrase the term as 'lo real maravilloso' or 'marvelous realism' in the preface of his work El reino de este mundo (The Kingdom of this World) (1949) and went on to create the basis for the genre, and oriented it in the continent of Latin America, as well as paved the way for such later writers as Isabel Allende and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Maggie Ann Bowers, in the introduction to her book, points out that the term 'magic realism' is an oxymoron that yokes together two distinct ideas; of reality, and of non-reality or magic (1). Christopher Warnes further comments that the term, in its literal meaning, is inherently complicated and contradictory as the concept of magic remains outside the domain of reality while realism excludes everything that is magical (2). This makes it evident that magic realism, as a literary genre and narrative technique can achieve multiple objectives when employed in different areas or aspects of the text.

Therefore, the concept of magic realism as a writing technique is also very closely associated to literatures outside the western canon, especially in the postcolonial literature. The use of magic realism to subvert the dominant, hegemonic discourse of the master, especially in the postcolonial context is explored by noted critic Kumkum Sangari in her essay "The politics of the possible". This research attempts to verify that African American literature, which is born out of the same colonial expansion, also uses magic realism with this objective in mind

and hence, it is visible that Naylor's use of magic realism enables her to establish autonomy of expression against the dominant white American discourse.

Spatial Studies refer to the study and theorization of spaces. Any discourse, whether oral or written, fictional or factual, is emplaced, either within the real world or a fictional creation. Spaces in literary theory comprise of any real, fictional, narrative or textual area occupied by any entity such as a person, a character, a reader or even an imagination. Every literary work is emplaced within a certain world, whether real or imagined. The space of a work of fiction denotes an imaginary space. However, even if a literary or artistic work claims to be realistic, it still continues to be a reproduction of real, social space. Further, in a literary work, the issue of space is multi-layered, since the author creates a space within the text and places his/her characters. The characters further inhabit a space of their own, which might be inspired by real world spaces, might represent them, or deviate from them. Thus, the exploration and categorization of various types of spaces, especially magic realist spaces is the motivation that drives this research. For that, Robert T. Tally Jr.'s seminal work "Spatiality" is used to locate ideas of various theorists of space such as Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of "Chronotope", Georg Lukacs' "transcendental homelessness", Henri Lefebvre's "perceived, conceived and lived space", Edward Soja's "Third Space", Michel Foucault's "Heterotopia" and such others. This discussion of various spatial theories would light the way for the exploration and understanding of the use of space, especially magic realist spaces, in the primary texts chosen for this research.

Space plays a pivotal role in all three novels, *Linden Hills*, *Mama Day* and *Bailey's Cafe* as the central characters and actions are all situated on the mystically successful location of Linden Hills in the first novel, on the magical and mythical island of Willow Springs with multiple epicentres of magic like The Other Place in the second novel or on the unnamed magical streets and its Café and Boardinghouse in the third novel. The necessity and advantage of emplacing the narrative in such magic realist spaces is studied through this work of research.

Further, the concept of space and the field of Spatial Studies gained importance in the post-modern period and is thus very closely associated with other post-modern literary trends. Thus, the association of the concepts of **post-colonial literature** with magic realism and that of **post-modern literature** with spaces helps to arrive at a deeper understanding of both the genres and the novels.

Literature Survey:

For the detailed analysis of the primary texts, the researcher has read numerous secondary texts related to Gloria Naylor's fictional works. In the context of *Linden Hills* (1985), most researchers have focused on the attainability of the American Dream and the racial conflict and its subsequent erasure. Terrence Tucker, in his work "In the Shadow of Cosby: Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* and the Postintegration of Black Elite", compares Naylor's portrayal and criticism of the Black community's slow and steady achievement of the white American ideal of success and the erasure of the racial identity of the upper and middle class African Americans to the portrayal of a similar ethos in Cosby's popular show. Tucker points out how Naylor juxtaposes that achievement against the moral, spiritual and cultural hollowness of the African American community on Linden Hills as he quotes "A central irony informing Naylor's work is found in her characters' lack of consciousness about the damnation of their souls" (qtd in Tucker 80).

Another interesting aspect of Naylor's *Linden Hills* is its setting which is directly influenced by Dante's *Inferno*. Naylor's characters reside on a hill with 8 crescents that spiral downwards into the most coveted place on the residential hill. Each of these crescents on the hill correspond to each of the 'circles of hell' portrayed by Dante. "'Prosperous People' and 'The Real Hell' in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*" by Nick Havely studies this very representation of Dante's Hell via Naylor's portrayal of the African American community. The

community works hard to impress Luther Needed, the owner of the hill, a symbol of the new Satan in this scenario, to move towards the bottom of 'the real hell of Linden Hills' as a symbol of their achievements of success, all the while losing their African American identities and their spiritual and moral consciousness. Havely, in his reading, also explores the narrative similarities in *Linden Hills* and *Inferno* as he points out:

> "Specific parallels between this narrative and *Inferno* are relatively easy to identify at a superficial level. Willie, the outsider from the poorer housing at the top of the hill … Willa, imprisoned in the basement with her dying son, can be seen as a female Ugolino". (212)

bringing out the comparison as well as the contrast between Dante's Eurocentric *Inferno* and Naylor's African American *Linden Hills* and how the narrative helps Naylor to not just rewrite the Eurocentrism and refute the White American oppression but also chart out her own cultural identity.

Most works studying *Linden Hills* focus on the narrative structure and the adaptation of Dante's plot or a comparative analysis in the setting of *Inferno*'s Hell and *Linden Hills*. However, not enough has been explored dedicatedly regarding the space and the mystical occurrences in the Needed family history and land. The researcher intends to explore the topography of the novel and delineate the magical and real aspects of the novel's narrative. In case of *Mama Day* (1988), the magic realist aspect of the novel has been explored extensively by most researchers and critics and it has also been focused on from an African American perspective. Several critics and researchers have compared Naylor's works with those of her African American contemporaries like Toni Morrison and even south Asian contemporaries like Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni, etc.

Susana Vega-González, in her article “Negotiating Boundaries in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and Naylor's *Mama Day*”, brings out the similarities in both texts and explicates how both of these authors use magic realism to create their unique, authentic narratives to give voice to their cultural experiences. She notes that, “[b]oth Divakaruni and Naylor have acknowledged their intention to transcend consciously the established boundaries of the real and to devote their literature to magic and spirituality” (Vega-González 3). She also discuss the lack of linearity and other specific magic realist techniques used in both the texts.

“Black Sisterhood in Gloria Naylor's Novels” by Larry R. Andrews embarks on a discussion of all of Naylor’s novels published till then, including the primary text for this research, *Mama Day*, and discusses how Black Sisterhood is both emphasized upon and problematized in Naylor’s works. Andrews also looks at the nature, motherhood, matriarchy, magic and spirituality as elements in Naylor’s novels. He points out that:

> “In *Mama Day* the power comes from folk tradition, from “foremothering”, and from Nature, as Naylor moves into the realm of matriarchal mythmaking. At its best this bond among women confers identity, purpose, and strength for survival.” (Andrews 2)

Maxine L. Montgomery’s article titled “Finding Peace in The Middle: Authority, Resistance, and the Legend of Sapphira Wade in Gloria Naylor's "*Mama Day*"” discusses the African American women’s struggle, from the times of slavery to the contemporary racial discrimination, and views this struggle from a postcolonial perspective. She writes,

> “Naylor lends a decidedly gendered, postcolonial to the chronicle of black resistance, even as she relies upon subversion and disruption in fictionalizing an alternate reality that challenges ideological assumptions present in the discourses of the larger society.” (Montgomery 155)

Thus, publications focused on *Mama Day* are oriented towards examining the novel from an African American, postcolonial, female perspective, and although they take the use of magic realism by Naylor into account, there is a lack of discussion of magic realist spaces, which are at the centre of the narrative. This proposed research intends to initiate a discussion on magic realist spaces and fill the evident gap.

Many a works are published on Naylor's debut novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), however, the ones published on her work *Bailey's Café* (1992) mainly discuss the text from other perspectives than magic realism. "*Bailey's Café* as Sports Bar, or, Why Baseball Needs a Way Station" by Margaret Whitt deals with the importance of Baseball, an important sport in the African American community and culture, and discusses how Baseball not only delineates the existence of rampant racism in the American society, but also gives alternative ways to subvert racial domination. Naylor's narrator takes a keen interest in Baseball and understands life and his own circumstances through the sport. Though Whitt focuses on the singular aspect of baseball and the way it affects the characters in the novel and therefore, the African American community at large, she also gives a deeper insight into the character of the unnamed narrator, as she claims, "Naylor uses the Maestro to present […] 'the rest of the story,' that part of the story that changes every possible perception about a character or place" (1471).

In her essay "Below the Surface: Female Sexuality in Gloria Naylor's '*Bailey's Café*'", Dorothea Buehler engages in a discussion on the comparison of the characters in the novel to Biblical characters and ascertains the degree of subversion and revision initiated by the Biblical rewriting in Naylor's work. She draws allusions between the very obvious parallels of Eve, as the first woman created by God, as well as the first major woman to occupy the magic realist street and own a magical structure of the Boardinghouse, and Mary, the Virgin Mother of Christ, and Mariam, a Jewish child of fourteen, who is pregnant despite being a virgin, as well as between such characters as Naylor's Sadie and the biblical Sarah. Buehler believes,

> [b]y reading and reinterpreting biblical master narratives, Naylor takes on the complex negotiation of common, androcentric interpretations of female figures in the Scriptures, questioning in particular the concepts of sacrifice and consequent victimization attributed to these forgotten "matriarchs". (426)

Therefore, Buehler's work mainly focuses on the feminist rewriting of the Bible evident in Naylor's work.

Sylvie Chavanelle, in her essay, "Gloria Naylor's '*Bailey's Café*': The Blues and Beyond" discusses another aspect close to the African American community, that of Blues music. Even though the novel is shaped like a Jazz song, with sections titled like "The Jam" and "The Wrap", Chavanelle claims that "*Bailey's Café* is closer to Blues than Jazz" and goes ahead to establish that claim (58). Ellison defines Blues as "an autobiographical chronical of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically" (qtd in Chavanelle 58). In light of this, she demonstrates how the novel describes lives of each character and their situations and challenges, narrated by themselves, and therefore conforming to the genre of Blues.

All of these works dealing with *Bailey's Café* thus focus on the other African American aspects of the text but do not engage with the magic realist spaces in the text. The proposed research thus intends to undertake the study of the primary texts from this perspective and examine the centrality of magic realist spaces in Naylor's narrative.

Statement of the Problem:

African American Literature, although a large body of work now, is still lying in the shadows of dominant, white hegemonic narratives. Works of African American women that portray their struggles and experiences are further marginalized. In such a scenario, works by African American women trying to break free from the dominant narrative need to be

acknowledged, studied and analyzed so as to create a stronger foundation for further literary explorations by the writers of this community. Gloria Naylor is one such author whose works constantly subvert the dominant narrative by employing different literary techniques. Her use of magic realism in context of spaces stands as a prominent and peculiar feature. This work attempts to study and analyze her usage of Magic Realist Spaces in her novels to create her distinct narrative and express her collective and individual experiences of the African American women's struggle in the society.

Aims and Objectives:

The discrimination against the African American community in the dominant white American society is a real issue, generally depicted using gritty realism. However, Gloria Naylor uses magic realism to convey the same real experiences of her characters. Moreover, space, place and setting play an important role in most of her works, which is evident from the nomenclature of her titles. Thus, the proposed research intends to explore the necessity of magic realism, especially pertaining to spaces, in Naylor's works. It aims to study the intersection of the two genres of magic realism and spatiality using various critical and theoretical texts as would be explicated further. The objectives of the research are as follows:

I. To attempt a study of the two diverse concepts of magic realism and spatiality
II. To introduce the concept of a magic realist space
III. To analyze a variety of spaces and realities depicted in fiction and their significance
IV. To study the techniques of merging space, reality and magic realism
V. To determine the necessity of bringing together magic realist spaces in a starkly realist narrative

Hypothesis:

I. Magic Realism as a genre is multi-faceted and can be adapted by different authors in different manners.

II. Spatial Studies stands as a theoretical approach that enables a deeper understanding of the plethora of spaces created and existing within literary texts.

III. Magic Realist Spaces is an intermingling of two different literary concepts and this hybrid concept enables the authors to subvert dominant narratives.

IV. African American Literature, much like Postcolonial works, uses many genres and concepts out of which Magic Realist Spaces as a technique of writing back to and writing away from dominant, white, hegemonic powers is employed powerfully.

V. Magic Realist Spaces within realistic narratives depicting real struggles stands out and brings the issues to the forefront.

Research Methodology:

As the proposed research is theoretical in nature, the researcher will adopt analytical methods to study the proposed topic. Qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources will be undertaken. The primary texts chosen for the research will be studied and an in-depth conceptual analysis will be provided by the researcher. Secondary sources of data such as journal articles, book chapters, reviews, interviews, theses and other publications, both online and offline, will be extensively focused on for this analysis. Personal interviews and other forms of data collection will be undertaken, if required. The critical theories relevant with the text will be applied to verify the hypotheses. The method of explanation and discussion of particular topics and concerns of research will be done to reach the conclusion of the undertaken research work. The 9th edition of the MLA Handbook would be used for in-text citations and bibliography.

Significance of the study:

Racial discrimination, leading to a disparity in social, literary and economic existence of African American people is still a prevalent problem in the American society. Racism has existed since the 17th century when the African slaves were brought to work in the American farmlands and since then, even after the abolishment of slavery, the African Americans have fought a constant battle to obtain rights to an equal society that they deserve.

To bring in the necessity of equality to the doubly unprivileged half of the society, i.e. the women, African American women's writing and movement takes an even important central stage and hence, tracing back and constant reviewing of African American Women's literature is a necessary literary measure. The proposed research intends to study African American literature from a postcolonial perspective, study the spaces demonstrated in literature and examine the magic realist nature of spaces and its necessity and advantage in a realistic text.

Tentative Chapterization:

The thesis will be divided into five chapters. These are as follows:

Chapter I- Introduction

This chapter will take a cursory survey of the concepts of African American literature, women's literature, magic realism, spatial studies and postcolonial literature. It will provide detailed biographical information about the author as well as discuss the primary texts in brief. It will also include an extensive review of the existing literature relevant to the topic and give an introductory insight into the methodology of research and the critical approaches used for this proposed work.

Chapter II- Defining the Indefinite: Magic Realism

Magic realism as a genre has been widely used by different authors across continents and literary eras. Each author has used this genre in their unique manner, elucidating their experiences and expressing their concerns through the use of this genre. This chapter will trace the history of magic realism as a genre and discuss its use as a narrative technique by varied authors. It will also focus on the magic realist aspects of both the primary texts.

Chapter III- Situating Textual Spaces: Spatiality

The concept of space in theory is multifaceted. When applied to literary works, the concept becomes even more elaborate. This chapter will focus on the existence of spaces related to literature and literary texts, and trace the history of spatial studies and its importance. It will explicate the various theories of space and examine the spaces within the primary texts of this research using the relevant theories.

Chapter IV- Blurred Lines: The Hazy Boundaries of Real and Magical in *Linden Hills, Bailey's Café* and *Mama Day*

This chapter will look at the amalgamation of the varied concepts of magic realism and spatial studies and explicate the intermingling of these concepts through a detailed discussion of the primary texts. It will elucidate the existence of magic realist spaces and the roles they play in these three texts and how they enable the texts to achieve its objectives and portray its themes in a unique and authentic manner.

Chapter V- Conclusion

This chapter will summarise the discussion thus far and conclude the discussion of the fiction under study. It will also shed light on the findings regarding the usage of magic realist

spaces within Naylor's literary works and the critical approaches applied to the texts. **Declaration**: Chapterization is subject to change if advised by the supervisor.

Scope and Limitations of the Study:

The proposed research will focus on the primary texts *Linden Hills*, *Mama Day* and *Bailey's Café* by the author Gloria Naylor. It will analyze these two texts from the perspective of African American literature and women's literature. Further, it will embark on an exploration of the genres of magic realism and spatial studies and how these are reflected in the primary texts. This research will also focus on how magic realism and spatial studies as a complex generic expression enable African American texts to achieve subversion of dominant narratives, much like the use of magic realism in post-colonial writings. Thus, this research will ponder upon the above areas in context of the chosen primary texts.

The focus of the present research is on the three texts, *Linden Hills*, *Bailey's Café* and *Mama Day* by Gloria Naylor. Other texts by the author, both fictional and non-fictional, are excluded from this research.

Year Wise Plan:

1st Year: The first year of the research will involve collection of primary sources and the first and second reading of these sources. It will also include collection of secondary sources for further research.

2nd Year: The researcher will embark on the reading and analysis of the secondary sources in the second year of research.

3rd Year: Writing of the first draft of the first and second chapter will be undertaken in the third year.

4th Year: Writing of the first draft of the third and fourth chapters will be undertaken in the fourth year.

5th Year: In the fifth year, the researcher will finalize the final draft of the thesis and undergo the Pre-PhD viva.

Expected Outcome:

The proposed research is expected to enlighten readers and researchers about the existence of various spatial planes and the yoking together of the genres of magic realism and spatiality to devise newer writing and narrative techniques to either subvert or enhance the experience of reality.

Scope for Further Research:

This research work is focused on the exploration of magic realist spaces in the selected novels of Gloria Naylor. However, scope remains for further research in this area of magic realist spaces in many other texts of various authors. Further, Naylor's works can also be further explored from the perspective of rewriting canonical texts like the Bible, the Book of Genesis and Dante's *Inferno* to name a few in order to construct her own narratives. Therefore, a large scope for further research exists in this area as well as with this author's works.

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